



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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United States Celebrates World Wetlands Day:

Oahu's Kawainui/Hamakua Marsh One of Three U.S. Wetlands Designated "Wetlands of International Importance"

WASHINGTON – The United States today designated the Kawainui and Hamakua Marsh complex on Oahu's windward coast as one of three new Wetlands of International Importance within the Nation. The new designations bring the total number of U.S. sites to 22, covering more than 3 million acres.

The sites are named under The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, more commonly known as the Ramsar Convention after its place of adoption in Iran in 1971. The other two new Ramsar sites are the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve located in California's southwest corner and the Grasslands Ecological Area in western Merced County, California, within the San Joaquin Valley.

Service Director Steve Williams announced the new sites in conjunction with World Wetlands Day, celebrated annually on February 2. "The new designations are tributes to local citizens and their partners who recognized the value of protecting these ecological treasures," Williams said. "The continued loss of wetlands worldwide poses a serious threat to both wildlife and people; on the ground partnerships are pivotal to efforts at home and abroad to stem this loss."

Sacred to Native Hawaiians, Kawainui Marsh is the largest remaining wetland in Hawaii, as well as the largest ancient Hawaiian freshwater fishpond. At one time, it was the center of a caldera of the Koolau shield volcano. The 1,000-acre wetland provides a primary habitat for four of Hawaii's endemic and endangered waterbirds — the Hawaiian Coot or 'alae ke'oke'o, the Hawaiian Moorhen or 'alae 'ula, the Hawaiian Stilt or kukuluae'o, and hybrids of the Hawaiian Duck or koloa maoli. The marsh also contains extensive archaeological and cultural resources, including ancient walled taro gardens or lo'i, the fishpond, and religious structures, and is eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hamakua Marsh is a smaller wetland (23 acres) historically connected to and immediately downstream of Kawainui Marsh. It also provides significant habitat for several of Hawaii's endangered waterbirds and is designated as a Hawaii State Wildlife Sanctuary.

The wetland complex also acts as a flood control reservoir, storing runoff from major storms. In addition, it traps sediment and absorbs nutrients and pollutants, reducing their impacts on Kailua Bay.

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Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, located in California's southwest corner, provides habitat for more than 370 bird species, including nine federally listed as threatened or endangered. The only bi-national watershed in California, it shares a watershed with Mexico and is a major stopover for migrating birds using the Pacific flyway.

The Grasslands Ecological Area in western Merced County, within the San Joaquin Valley, comprises California's largest remaining contiguous block of freshwater wetlands. It encompasses a host of federal, state and privately owned ecosystems, such as marshes, riparian corridors, vernal pool complexes, and grasslands.

“International recognition raises the visibility of a wetland and provides economic benefits to local communities through increased tourism and recreational opportunities,” Williams said.

Wetlands play a vital role in water filtration and flood protection. Additionally, they provide habitat to local plants and wildlife, as well as an important resting and feeding place for many migratory species.

The Ramsar Convention is the only international agreement dedicated to the worldwide protection of a particular type of ecosystem. Currently 144 member nations work together to coordinate wetland conservation efforts. More than 1,414 sites have been designated to date, covering a surface area of more than 306 million acres. Because many wetland habitats span international boundaries and many wetland species are migratory, Ramsar countries recognize the importance of supporting wetland management, research and education, outreach and training programs beyond their own borders. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of State are the administrative authorities for this Convention in the United States, and it is this treaty that serves as the cornerstone for the Service's International Wetlands Program.

A wetland of international importance – or “Ramsar site” – can be nominated by almost any local government, organization, or community, so long as the wetland meets established criteria. The Kawainui and Hamakua Marsh Complex was nominated by Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle and Hawaii's Thousand Friends. The qualifying criteria are based on the wetland's distinguishing characteristics and its ability to support valued species or key wildlife populations. Ramsar designations must be endorsed by all of the site's owners and managers.

“Wetlands are important to communities, cultures, governments and business,” said Service biologist and Ramsar specialist Gilberto Cintron-Molero. “They are a source of food, water, recreation, transportation, and are closely linked to the heritage of local people.”

For more information on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service International Wetlands Program, visit: <http://international.fws.gov/ramsar/ramsar.htm>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands and helps foreign and Native American Tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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Note to Editors: Still photos of Kawainui Marsh are available by calling 808 792 9530.